

**Book Review: China's Urban Transition. By John Friedmann. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.**

Review by: [Susan M. Walcott](#)

Walcott, S. M. (2007) "China's Urban Transition", by John Friedmann, in *Economic Geography*, Vol. 83(4):445-446.

**Made available courtesy of Wiley-Blackwell: The definitive version is available at <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com>**

**\*\*\*Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Wiley-Blackwell. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.\*\*\***

**Article:**

China's role as the world's largest country and global manufacturing behemoth commands attention, along with apprehension over tremors arising from its complex rural-urban adjustments. John Friedmann, a well-known, retired UCLA urban and regional planner, wrote this book for the people he represents: intelligent, interested nonspecialists. He succeeds admirably with an amply illustrated volume of 128 pages, accompanied by copious notes and references revealing his academic background. A few geographers are included in his readings, although they are greatly outnumbered by historians and sociologists. Covering the post-Mao period from 1980 to 2005, Friedmann focuses on the varieties of urban processes and outcomes across China that he sees as compellingly huge and important for the future. The following section summarizes the book's main chapters, concluding with a discussion of some of the most important points he considers.

The introductory chapter begins auspiciously with a clearly delineated map of China's major provinces and cities. Friedmann's definition of urbanization includes "administrative, economic, physical, sociocultural, and political aspects," a usefully broad categorization. Laboring under a surge in the urban population of 470 million, from 10 percent of the country's total inhabitants in 1949 to 36 percent in 2000, the inadequate provision of the urban infrastructure contributed to imbalances in development. Coupled with the rapidity of post-1980 development, this situation led to lagging sectors, unproductive locations, and an uneven urban bias. Friedmann often invokes Castell's "global space of flows" to trace a capitalism-induced unevenness and avoid the global--world city issue, wisely preferring, in China's case, to focus on an endogenous process of urbanization from within.

Chapter 1 presents a summary of China's pre-Deng urban history, wisely citing geographer Paul Wheatley's classic work on the Chinese predilection for strategies of controlling space, from geometric enclosures to work units (danwei). Chapter 2 invokes Skinner's macroregional analysis, based on watersheds and other systematizing schemes. The Mao-era strategy of urban development functioned as an extension of military strategy, particularly with the favoring of "Third Front" interior-growth cities. These cities were then mapped into the post-Mao "Ladder-Step" three-belt megaregions of west, central, and coastal China, with the call for the development of wealth exacerbating regional inequalities. Chapter 3 examines industrialization's transformation of townships and villages into industry-centered urban areas. Six conditions for rapid rural urbanization highlight this state-promoted transference of growth up the urban hierarchy. Friedmann wisely spotlights the importance of this scheme to take pressure off cities by encouraging periurban concentrations to capture otherwise city-bound migration in other locations, a phenomenon he labels a "multicentric urban field."

The spatial mobility of a population migrating toward urban centers is the focus of Chapter 4. The chapter describes a flood of officially unacknowledged "floaters" who settled on the urban periphery to work primarily in factories and construction, living in rented villages and doing displaced agrarian or industrial work. At this point, Friedmann makes useful distinctions among types of migrants, including those who inhabit urban

enclaves--inviting the attention of urban authorities and occasionally enforced dispersion. Chapter 5 explores the withering away of the danwei system. The corresponding rise of self-responsibility for both employers and employees, along with an increase in leisure and less central mandates, led to the creation of a "civil society," in which people have taken control of organizing their own lives and that of the world around them.

Local governance, from the changing role of city- and county-level officials and local elites to a postrevolution top-down controlled environment under the danwei organizational system, is the focus of Chapter 6. The encouragement of entrepreneurial methods, however, frequently leads to corruption, given the lack of supervision. As the state turns its eyes away with the devolution of power to local authorities, inadequate controls over the means of getting gloriously rich replace its formerly ever-present gaze in many respects. Urban planning consequently lags under the assault of independent developers, a commonly lamented situation in the United States.

Friedmann concludes by reflecting on the "sustainable city" movement, attempting to formulate a future that will incorporate ties to aspects of China's past, along with ways to address environmental abuse, rising unemployment, and increasing inequality. He avoids tying autonomy in the economic realm to the loosening of controls in the political arena, referring instead to "expanding spheres of personal autonomy." Invoking the common phrase "with Chinese characteristics," he ends by arguing for Chinese exceptionalism.

As with many grandly sweeping treatments, from those of Toynbee to the Durants, the disputes are in the details. To what extent, for example, can China's urban development be separated from external global factors? Shenzhen thrives, as it was designed to do, on its proximity to global entrepot Hong Kong, Shanghai flourishes on foreign direct investment (FDI) according to its historical role, and the Pearl River Delta prospers via links to its overseas descendants. Although Chongqing is portrayed as an "economic growth pole for Sichuan," it functions more as a magnet for displaced migrants from the Three Gorges Dam and money from the central government. A few foreign firms have located in the Mountain City, but Chengdu continues to attract far more investment activity. Describing specifics of the Wenzhou Model, Friedmann gets into trouble by citing only one reference, a common problem of the broad-brush nonspecialist. Cherry picking a source here and there indicates his lack of awareness of underlying contentions that illuminate as well as inflame an issue. A brief laudatory description of local village election practices conflates party governance with the parallel civil process--a division that undermines seeming autonomy, but struggles to truly express local wishes that are often subverted in myriad ways by too loose a structure.

Another question rests with Friedmann's assertion that there was "little [the central government] could do to 'steer' the incoming flows of capital." In actuality, the authorities effectively assert their preferences for the location of FDI, according to numerous interviews with corporate decision makers. Nor was Shenzhen "widely regarded as the best in country" location; academics who were assigned there often regarded it as a cultural desert, and many business interests migrated to the Yangtze River delta region.

An evaluation of Friedmann's analysis of the four major issues on which this book focuses reveals a largely perceptive grasp. On the two-track but basically endogenous nature of Chinese urban development, seeking to retain political control of the inevitable urban-economic transition, Friedmann correctly captures the complexity and key elements. With regard to a Chinese "civil society," however, he optimistically overestimates its existence. The strength of individual urban identities constitutes a less compelling issue than others, dwarfed by a simmering crisis in the final question of urban governance: whose voice or voices will be heard? And how angry will the dispossessed become, along with the predicted demands of a new middle-upper tier? As Friedmann concludes, the ending remains unwritten.